

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Isaiah 66:18–23**

**Sermon: “Mission: To Gather”**

A resounding theme for this Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost is the universality of God’s mission to save all nations. Just as our Lord’s death and resurrection were on behalf of all people throughout the whole world, so is our Lord’s mission.

How many of you love spy movies? How about the Mission: Impossible movies? In these movies, and there are several, Tom Cruise plays a CIA spy by the name of Ethan Hunt. In each of the movies, Hunt embarks on a mission that’s so difficult it seems virtually impossible to carry out. Of course, Hunt as the hero always finds a way to accomplish the impossible. I especially like the third movie in the series. This time Hunt is betrayed by his own comrades and ends up not only setting out on a seemingly impossible mission but also a completely unexpected one, as he seeks to clear his own name.

Our text for today, Isaiah 66:18–23, is not about spies or the CIA, but it is about a mission that seems, at first glance, completely unexpected and virtually impossible.

At first glance, it seems rather unexpected that Yahweh, the God of Israel, would set out to gather the nations to himself and save them. The Israelites were Yahweh’s chosen people, his “treasured possession,” a people whom he caringly gathered to himself (Exodus 19:5–6).

In stark contrast, the nations were to be slaughtered and scattered, not gathered (Isaiah 17:13; 34:1–17)! The nations were foreigners and outsiders, undeserving of Yahweh’s care and attention. The nations were unclean and unholy, an offense to Yahweh (66:17).

We are “the nations”—outsiders, unclean, and unworthy of Yahweh’s attention. And even Israel is under Yahweh’s judgment because of their unfaithfulness.

At first glance, it seems even more unexpected that Yahweh would use those gathered from these very nations to carry out his mission to save the nations. The nations were enemies of both Yahweh and his people. Only a few scant years after Yahweh speaks these words, the terrible Assyrian army descends and destroys over half of Israel!

About a hundred years after that, the Babylonians descend and destroy the other half of Israel and carry many of the Israelites into exile! Of course, before we point at the Israelites, we remember that we are numbered along with these enemies of Yahweh.

In Romans 5:10 we read: ***“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”*** It surely seems preposterous, even scandalous, that Yahweh would use those who were his enemies to carry out his mission!

The mission seems not only unexpected, but even impossible. But for Yahweh, our God, the unexpected becomes expected and the impossible becomes possible. In taking a second look from God's perspective, we see that it was very much expected that Yahweh would save the nations and gather them to himself. His missionary heart has always been to save his entire creation and all people from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

In the beginning, as soon as Adam and Eve rebel against him, Yahweh seeks them out and promises a Savior who would defeat Satan for them. We catch a glimpse of the end where the apostle John sees ***“a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb”*** (Revelation 7:9).

God accomplishes this by sending Jesus Christ as our Savior, so that whoever believes in him, regardless of her or his racial, ethnic, linguistic, or social back-ground, might have eternal life (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ is the “sign” toward which all the nations gather (v 19; 56:8; 11:10–12). As Jesus Christ is lifted up on the cross, he draws all people to himself (Jn 12:32). Through faith in the forgiveness we have by Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are no longer filthy but clean, no longer God’s enemies but his own children (Isaiah 19:25; Ephesians 3:6). In taking a second look from God’s perspective, we see that it is also very much expected that Yahweh would use the nations to carry out his mission to save the nations. Yahweh uses people to carry out his mission. Yahweh could have chosen to intervene directly or simply to use angels as his missionaries, but instead he most often works through people. Yahweh graciously chose Israel to be his missionaries, so to speak, so that through them he might save the whole world (Exodus 19:5–6), though they often forgot this as their purpose.

He chose Abraham, not to be a blessing for Abraham and his own family (a point which the Israelites often forgot), but to be, in the descendant, Jesus Christ, a blessing for ***“all the families of the earth”*** (Genesis 12:3).

Israel was always meant to be Yahweh’s light for the nations to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). We need not be surprised, then, when Isaiah tells us that Yahweh gathers the nations to himself and then sends them out to be his missionaries to declare his glory to the nations (v 19).

And again, let us not forget that we are those nations! So upon closer examination from God’s perspective, we should expect Yahweh to use us for this mission that he makes possible: Yahweh gathers us to himself and sends us out to the nations. What a blessed privilege it is to be graciously chosen by God as his ***“chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light”*** (1 Peter

2:9)!

God's mission is always centripetal and centrifugal. Centripetal (pulled inward): God gathers and strengthens us through Word and Sacrament. Centrifugal (pulled outward): God sends us out to declare his glory to the nations. Not everyone is called to serve as pastors or sent as called missionaries to serve overseas or even here in North America. But we all have been granted the joyful privilege of being witnesses where God has placed us (to family, friends, work, community).

Unlike Ethan Hunt's missions in the movies, Yahweh's mission, our mission is neither unexpected nor impossible. Our Lord's mission should not be surprising at all, because it reflects the very missionary heart of God. It reflects who he is as our Creator God. Neither is it impossible. In fact, it is very much possible because it is God's mission.

Its successful accomplishment is already guaranteed because Jesus Christ accomplished the mission through his death and resurrection and continues to carry out that mission through you and through me. Graciously gathered. Graciously sent. What a joyful privilege we have to be his missionaries to the world all around us!

Amen